

Voices
from the
GapsCatherine
Liu

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I felt stupid and lost. I wanted the supposed wisdom of my supposed people to pull me out of my predicaments, but they would not beam me back aboard the mothership, no matter how I begged them to. Now I was afraid that this famous wisdom never really existed at all, it was just a fortune cookie rumor. Who were the Chinese to me, and who was I to Hecuba? America was the only space I had ever really known. Maybe I was not here on a mission at all. Maybe it was all just a silly fantasy. Maybe the past beyond my memory never existed, China never really existed, I was never really Chinese. I wanted to believe that Joe was a kind of sweet cipher. I told him he had a secret, and he believed me. I lied. Day broke. Alone in this city, I got lost in the crowd. I wrote the story of the city; I didn't have my own story. The City was my story.

— Oriental Girls Desire Romance

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**Quick Facts**

- * Born in 1964
- * Chinese-American novelist and academic
- * Author of the autobiographical novel *Oriental Girls Desire Romance*

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Biography

Born in 1964 in Taipei, Taiwan, Catherine Liu came to the United States with her family at the age of four. Her parents were a part of the exiled community from mainland China, and her father worked as a translator for the United Nations. Catherine Liu has been interested in writing ever since she was a child, trying her hand at, among other projects, a science fiction story at the age of twelve. Nevertheless, she had to find a compromise between her love of writing and her parents' wishes for her to be economically secure.



Catherine Liu

Biography continued

Living the immigrant experience in the United States, Liu's parents greatly valued a sense of safety. The liberal arts were to them a space for the privileged in this society. Coming from a country where ideology defined the boundaries of expression, they believed that by exposing oneself through writing, one certainly becomes vulnerable to the possibility of persecution; in short, thoughts were something that could be taken away. For this reason, Liu decided to try to find a compromise between familial demands and personal desires by studying literature, which she also enjoyed, instead of writing fiction. She received a B.A. in literature with a focus on theory from Yale in 1985. Liu went on to receive a Ph.D. in French Literature from the CUNY Graduate Center in 1994. She is currently an Assistant Professor in the Department of French and Italian at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.

Throughout the time that she studied literature, Liu always somehow found the time to write. She describes writing as being sustenance for her, as essential to living as is breathing. While in graduate school, she wrote *Oriental Girls Desire Romance*, although it wasn't published until 1997. The novel takes place in 1980s Manhattan. The unnamed narrator, who has recently graduated from an Ivy League school, wants to succeed in her ambition to write, but she is continuously struggling to find herself, at times falling into disastrous situations and relationships. Liu explores the feminine experience by telling a coming of age story of a young woman who makes many mistakes throughout the novel. According to Liu, because mistakes are now characterized as deadly in our society, she believes that an important aspect of the novel is that the narrator learns from her mistakes, albeit at a great price. There is an emphasis on the idea that one cannot, and perhaps should not, always make a safe choice. Liu also stresses that it is difficult to understand the changing relationships between men and women and what it means to be a woman.

Catherine Liu describes *Oriental Girls Desire Romance* as a fictional autobiography. In order to write it, she had to distance herself from the work through the process of polishing. Liu says that writing teaches patience with oneself because it is not about speed, but time -- a craftsmanship that makes the rough become smooth by paying attention to many small details. She also believes that writing pure fiction is a privilege which for her conjures up an image of a man with a white beard sitting in front of his typewriter at his country estate.



Catherine Liu

Biography continued

As a minority, Liu feels that she has the burden of writing herself in from the margins. Since the minority experience in the United States has not been adequately explored, for Liu writing involves using a voice of self-invention which inevitably, therefore, requires the inclusion of autobiographical aspects in her work. Richard Wright's *Black Boy*, the story of how he came to write, has been especially influential for her in this respect. While Liu says that many people would think that a Chinese girl who grew up in the suburbs and a black man who grew up in the segregated South would have nothing in common, this is one of the works she especially identifies with. Through her own writing, she hopes to pay her debt to literature with the gift that she will give to others. She jokes that one day she may even be able to sit down and write her own science fiction novel. For now, she is working on her second novel, *Suicide of an Assistant Professor*, a comic novel about professional suicide in academia.

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

Books

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